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ABSTRACT

Superhero play among preschool children appears to be quite different from socio-dramatic play. While exhibiting characteristics of socio-dramatic play, superhero play does not facilitate the development of social or verbal skills. Observations of television programs indicated that superhero play provides little opportunity for verbal reasoning, problem solving, talking things out, or compromising. Observations of children in groups who were engaged in superhero play revealed that such play had very little story line, was interruptive and aggressive, and reduced the likelihood of the emergence of other forms of behavior. In addition, threatening environmental conditions seemed to affect the timing of children's superhero play. Preschool teachers, when surveyed, indicated that such play was difficult to redirect or build into constructive experiences for children. Some techniques for addressing the superhero phenomenon are advocated in the literature. Children engage in superhero play to alleviate fear or because they have limited opportunities for truly socio-dramatic play. In these cases the environment should be stabilized and opportunities provided. When children's play includes a balance between superhero and socio-dramatic elements, no intervention may be needed. Individual preschool children appearing to be immersed in a superhero character should be viewed in terms of how their needs are met by such play, the extent to which superhero play is used, how alternative experiences might better meet those needs, and whether intervention is needed. (RH)

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FROM SCOOPY-DOO TO SKELETOR: EVOLVING ISSUES IN SUPERHERO PLAY

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Five years ago Zita and I first began looking at this issue and, here in Washington, at the NAEYC conference of 1981 we brought it to you, our colleagues. During the ensuing time we have continued to ponder the questions we see surrounding this issue as we read the literature, attended other workshops, and watched the children in our centers. We heard many define the play as socio-dramatic and thus they ascribed all the positive values of socio-dramatic play to the superhero play. There seemed to be much encouragement to go with the play, develop it and make it more constructive. We discussed and re-discussed this, as it was a conclusion we had questioned and still did. The issue seemed more complex to us than whether the play was good or bad, whether it should be allowed or banned, encouraged or ignored, and so we decided to spend some concentrated time examining again the play itself, the underlying source materials (yes, we too watched Thundercats, He-Man and Shee-Ra). We reviewed the current literature and talked to teachers in preschools and full day child care centers and, most of all, we watched, interacted and talked with the children. Our feelings regarding the complexity of the issue were only confirmed. It was clear that there was more to this play than met the eye, and that it fulfilled different needs for different children. Even that was not a constant---there were times the play seemed very important and even necessary, and other times it diminished on its own. But I don't want to get ahead of myself---though it's tempting and kind of exciting.

First to lay some groundwork, let's look at socio-dramatic play as it is defined by Sara Smilansky. She gives 6 essential ingredients of this play. They include:

1. Imitative role play in which the child expresses a make-believe role in imitative acts and/or words.
2. Make-believe with objects.
3. Make-believe in substituting words for acts and situations.
4. Persistence in the episode for at least ten minutes.
5. Interaction of at least two participants.

6. Verbal communication about the play.

The first four elements occur in dramatic play. The last two are essential for socio-dramatic play. Our superhero play does have all six of these elements. However, if you look further at the role of this play Sara Smilansky indicates the 3 main areas developed in a child by true socio-dramatic play.

First is creativity which based on utilization of past experiences. Smilansky states, "The imaginative 'let's pretend', which is based in understanding and modified by the necessity of adjusting to the ideas of others, is an important part of living itself. This imaginative element in spontaneous play is part of the creative approach to experience so valuable in the scientist and artist." The superhero play we were seeing was indeed imaginative in the "let's pretend" sense, but it did not seem to lend itself to adjusting to the ideas of others nor did it involve the child's real world. The second area Smilansky refers to is intellectual growth. This includes the power of abstraction, widening of concepts and acquisition of new knowledge. She writes, "In playing together, children share their ideas and concepts about the world around them. Language is important here and children use language more freely in socio-dramatic play than at most other times." We felt the superhero play fell short in this respect. It lacked a real sharing of ideas and concepts and was limited in language, with physical feats (actual or imaginary) taking precedence. The third and last area Smilansky discusses is that of social skills. She includes positive give and take, tolerance and consideration. These social skills develop in carrying on episodes of family or community life when children must use techniques for getting along with others for achieving purposes or constructing settings. If play has the 6 elements Sara Smilansky describes, but does not lend itself to the development of social and verbal skills which are primarily developed in socio-dramatic play, then I wonder if it is in fact accurate to classify it as socio-dramatic play.

We kept this question in mind as we examined the superhero play more closely. Five years ago we watched Superman, Batman and Robin, Scooby Doo and the Duke Brothers. This year we watched He-Man, Shee-Ra, Thundercats and just a smattering of the

Transformers. There were some differences---the characters were much more sophisticated looking, the women were sexier, the men much more muscular (they most certainly work-out) and the new "hi-tech" look was seen everywhere! There was also the message at the end of each episode "He- Man's rebels (or were they Shee-Ra's?) were fighting for the freedom of speech, something precious to us all" The Thundercats' message was even more imposing as a conversation ensued something like this "Strength alone is never enough. No true Thundercat could ever do something so bad. Imagine if one of us did? I guess we just need to make sure we never do. Being Thundercats, we have an extra responsibility to be good" A rather heavy message for a three year old. These messages may make the producers feel better about the socially redeeming value of the cartoon and its violence, but as we watch the children, play out these themes, the messages never came up---only the battles. The changes we saw, then, were very superficial, and the core of the play still was as we described and still was disturbing. For one thing, it always had conflict at the center of it. The nature of the conflict was, once again, big over little, strong over weak. The playing out of these conflicts, then by necessity, included aggression - physical aggression with or without actual contact or verbal aggression. Conflicts were resolved by physical strength or magical powers. In superhero play, there was no real opportunity for verbal reasoning, problem solving, finding out that it was okay to talk things out, or for compromise. There was no opportunity to develop a real give and take or an exchange of ideas. There was only conflict, "pow-pow" or XXX XXXX, and then fly away.

In watching the children as they engaged in this play we watched groups of children and that occasional individual child who carried the socio-dramatic character with him/her even when alone. First the group play -- what we saw was very little actual story line or plot, but rather a great deal of running (flying, etc.) screaming, chasing, and some interesting and rather threatening posturing---the hands and fingers have it these days! The play was interruptive - often intruding into other more constructive play; there was much physical aggression -- sometimes it began without actual contact, but seemed, more often than not, to involve actual physical contact - sometimes accidental and other times intentional as the excitement built. The

conflicts were always resolved by physical strength or magical powers with virtually no verbal reasoning or arriving at compromise solutions. In addition, we noticed that when disagreements occurred the child often flew away rather than attempting to work through an issue. One final element we noticed was that the play often became all encompassing and spilled from the inside to the outside, and thus, without constant redirection, children could easily spend all their time engaged in this play to the exclusion of using other materials---not only potentially increasing the overall level of aggression, but also limiting the individual child in well rounded "total" development. And then there was that individual child who was always in character--we worried about her or him. But again, I don't want to jump ahead as Zita will explore that issue soon.

There was one other element, one we hadn't seen before. Perhaps we just hadn't had the opportunity to watch it develop. It involved the timing of the play with respect to the child's environment. One of our programs at ASU is a full day child care center, and this summer we had several staff changes. The main change was the loss of the center coordinator who also had been the lead teacher for the 4 and 5 year olds. She had been very visible and important to the stability of the children. The circumstances of her leaving were such that the children knew about it quite a bit in advance. We talked about it and emphasized those staff people who would still be there, and how we were talking to lots of people to find the best possible person who really liked children and knew how to talk with them and listen to them and take care of them. As the summer progressed, we found ourselves struggling with an increase in aggression, physical and verbal, and lots of rough and out of hand play. In observing to aid the problem solving process, the light finally dawned. What they were playing was He-Man, Shee-Ra -- power, safety, security. Things were changing and the children were wondering if school would be okay and if they would be taken care of. Being powerful and able to take care of themselves was more important than ever. In fact, as we thought about it, most of these children were getting ready to leave our center after 2 or 3 years and to go to kindergarten, another exciting and yet threatening experience. These insights did not eliminate the need to deal with the out-

of-bounds aspects of their behavior, but it gave us valuable insights into what was behind the behavior and how we could redirect it or even diminish it by building other activities that met those needs. One thing we did was to rearrange our staffing to stabilize that class, moving our most experienced and longtime aide in there full time to provide even more strength and stability. Sure enough, as our new center coordinator came in and the atmosphere became more stable and consistent, the play diminished even more on its own.

At a recent state AEYC conference, I had the opportunity to survey teachers regarding what their current and past experiences with superhero play were. I was careful not to state any opinions about the play as I gave out the surveys. Each one saw the play in their classrooms, and most of them had problems with it becoming too rough and aggressive. They too had seen only superficial changes -- mentioning the sophistication, sexuality, and hi-tech. Some of them commented there were more "evil" characters and that the play was in fact more violent than in the past. Nearly all were frustrated with redirection, finding its effectiveness only short lived. Most had developed some rules which mainly limited the bringing and/or sharing of toys, and an almost universal rule of no weapons seemed to exist. The teachers also seemed to be expressing an ambivalence we were familiar with--- trying to remain child centered and taking cues from the interests of the child and yet not seeing these interests develop into anything constructive. Because they found the play so all consuming and aggressive, they expressed little interest or faith in building curriculum around it. Additional comments ranged from "most of the interest is in the fighting, not the story," to "the children seem more deeply involved, they seem to kill more", to this touching comment, "...the problems (in the superhero play) can be solved only with fighting--- never talking things out. Children need to learn to express things with their words, not always with striking with the hands. When TV and toys run side by side, they feel there is only one way to do the playing --- the pattern is set. Creative play is then lacking when such guidelines are set so strongly. The sweetness of childhood is overlooked and the hardness of the world brought in very early in life." Zita will now look a bit at the literature, develop more completely what the children were

telling us about their needs -- especially that individual child-- and conclude with the conclusions we came up with. We then want to welcome your responses, experiences and ideas.

— This past year we researched and reviewed the literature - what we found were only a couple of articles about superhero play specifically and in them there were many suggestions for going with the play and making it more productive. In fact, the common thread in what we read was just this:--- "This is socio-dramatic and/or thematic-fantasy play so it must be okay- and here are some suggestions to make it more productive and to help you curb the aggression. "What was absent from the literature was an in depth look behind the behavior in terms of the childrens' needs. We read the articles and journals and went to the workshops to see if what we were seeing and saying was reflected. If we had listened to and read about the complexity of superhero play, we probably would have stopped our investigation but we found little of that. Here is some of what we read and listened to:

In the May 1986 issue of Young Children there was an article entitled "Living with He-Man" by Kastelnik, Whirem and Stein. They saw superhero play as dramatic play and discussed, among the benefits of it, the fact that with this play children improve their language skills, problem solving skills and cooperation. They state that there is building of shared social relationship with peers and enhancement of sensori-motor skills, divergent thinking and creativity. This is not what we were seeing in the superhero play in our schools. They do recognize the problem with the play being too aggressive. Below are some of their suggestions for adult strategies for making superhero play a constructive experience. Here I might again interject that the common thread in the literature was to go with the play and try to make it more productive- so with that in mind it is suggested that the adults :

- point out the kindness, helpfulness and generosity of the superhero to children
- discuss real heros- Helen Keller, Jackie Robinson, Elizabeth Blackwell
- set up rules for time and place
- explore related concepts

Batman -> study bats and bat caves

Spiderman -> study spiders and webs

Star Wars -> study space and space travel

- adults help children plan play such as working out rescue operations with maps and tools

It seemed to us that, though these strategies could make for interesting discussions and explorations, this is beside the point of the superhero play and won't meet or satisfy the childrens needs. We continue to seek to understand the reason behind the behavior. In an earlier article, "Living With Superman", Kastelnik states that superhero play helps children build self-confidence at a time which they have so little power and prestige. We see much the opposite. We see them use it protectively until they experience their own competence. She also observes that an advantage of superhero play is that in it the difference between good and bad is crystal clear and that this play gives children the opportunity to practice those murky moral and ethical decisions they'll be making in the future. She states that superhero play helps children create a way to experiment with ideals and to understand values of honor, justice, courage and honesty. Based on the cartoons that we watched and the play that we've seen, this view seems questionable at best. We attended an NAEYC workshop recently which addressed superhero play. We found that it gave excellent strategies for encouraging pro-social behaviors and clearly defined thematic-fantasy play. The presenters included superhero play in their definition of thematic-fantasy play. As we have said, we view superhero play as separate from both thematic-fantasy play and the sociodramatic play, so the strategies given in that workshop (though certainly effective for those kinds of play) didn't seem to us to apply to guiding superhero play ----- in large part because these strategies failed to address any of the reasons behind the behaviors. We saw and heard the ambivalence and uncertainty in the teachers we polled - there is a message here too and we respect it. With the children's superhero play we heard very little language and very little cooperation other than occasional turn taking. We saw very little incorporation of available materials. We did not see the children playing thematically. The literature did not convince us that s.h. play held the values of socio-dramatic

play or even the potential of affording opportunity for the children to develop social and verbal skills. So where did this leave us? It left us going back to the children - just as we always do.

In looking at the group superhero play, we saw three possibilities of a group dynamic and felt that each would be dealt with in a slightly different way-----all of which come from the children's point of view and meet their needs. The first possibility is one which Kathy referred to: a group in which the environment needs to be stabilized. There are scarey and shakey things in this environment and the children are protecting themselves. The need is for a stabilization of the staff or physical surroundings. Environments may have had too many changes or they may need some changes. A second possibility is that the environment needs some sprucing up in terms of opportunities for developing appropriate sociodramatic play. The children may need some stimulation of activities, field trips, materials to build the kind of high level play that encourages creativity, intellectual growth, language development and social skills. This kind of play will allow children to experience new competencies and new skills. This, by the way, also sets the scene for helping the individual child. A third possibility is a group in which there is a real balance to the amount of superhero play - the children do other things also, the play is not overly aggressive and out of bounds and they are handling it fine. It would seem that in this group no intervention would be needed.

The next thing we felt that it was important to consider was our continuing concern for the child who appeared locked in this play. We felt the caution that this play must be very important or this child wouldn't hang on to it. Again, we knew we had to look behind the play in deciding how to deal with the individual child. In working closely with several children who appeared very immersed in their superhero character, we watched two distinct profiles emerge that I'd like to tell you about.

As a three year old, Jason always had an article of clothing that identified him as Mr. Rogers. He was Mr. Rogers a great deal of the time - he played alone or in parallel play much of the time but then many three year olds do. Returning as a four year old, we saw a great change in Jason. He had become Skeletor-always wearing a belt or a shirt (or a shirt under a shirt).

Jason greeted everyone as Skeletor-with a Skeletor voice and his fingers extended. The majority of his play was as a superhero. He moved in posturing ways and gestured with his arms. He often had a voice accompaniment as he played alone - a soft monologue or songs under his breath. His movement with arms out and shoulders fixed was quite evident in his play and other activities didn't interfere with his character. When helping with clean-up, he would carry a single item with one hand and have the other arm and fingers out in the characteristic pose. Jason had a thorough knowledge of his characters and his solitary play often incorporated part of the standard story line like "Skeletor is looking for the castle". When Jason did accomplish a task he would insist, "Skeletor climbed the climber, not Jason". This went on for a long time despite repeated attempts at including him in other activities. Jason was very different during the structured times being attentive, listening well, being non-disruptive. It was during the open play times that we saw he was lacking the group social skills of entry, communication, cooperation and problem solving. Jason seemed lost in his superhero play and unable to let go of it. We felt that his superhero fantasy led more and more to isolation and that this isolation at his age of an older 4 year old was a real matter of concern. Jason's home life contributed to some enormous fears - there were problems with the possibility of a non-custodial parent taking him. So with this particular child the need was not to study spiders and webs or skeletons and bodyparts but was to find a way to reduce his fears and to pair that with opportunities for him to experience his own competence over and over and over again in order to build his self-esteem. During this process, there would be a gradual dropping of the superhero character.

The second profile of an individual child is that of Arthur who makes quite healthy use of a superhero character. Arthur is an extremely bright child who at 2 1/2 watched the T.V. shows, knew all the names and characteristics of the various He-Man stories and could relate quite complex story lines (some of which of course came from his own very fertile imagination). Being so bright, Arthur has a very heightened awareness of the world and its dangers - his superheroes protect him from some of these things that most 2 and 3 year olds don't think about.

He is also by temperament quite physically cautious. His superheroes can ward off the more rowdy or rough children. Arthur needs and uses the play but he can let go of it when he feels safe and secure. We see this demonstrated quite graphically. Arthur is between 3 1/2 and 4 now and comes to school 3 days a week. Very consistently his Monday morning arrival is in superhero character - with posturing and talk. It usually takes him a full 10 minutes to enter the room. Wednesday is less character and less time and by Friday he is Arthur coming to school and walking right into the room with a greeting for the teacher and hellos to the children. When Arthur sees someone new in the room, he greets this stranger by going to his cubbie, getting his He-Man figure, taking it out and hissing at the person. If the person listens to what is behind the behavior and responds with a safety message, Arthur relaxes and converses. Arthur enters groups often by shooting into the established play, saying "I'm He-Man, I'm strong" and posturing. The other children back off, the teacher comes over and facilitates the entry and the play and Arthur is in. On a day that older children were on the yard, he told his mother that he had made a He-Man slime pit and had thrown them all in it. Actually, as he had cautiously watched from the door, he had accomplished this in his mind --- quite a healthy method of taking care of those scary big kids. Arthur is engaging now in some dramatic play with one other child. It sometimes is superhero play but it's not isolated - it includes some exchange of ideas, creative thinking and building of a social relationship. He also is beginning to enter some sociodramatic play. We've recently had part of the yard set up to reflect a nearby construction project - with heavy equipment, sandbox, shovels and woodworking. We've added hats, vests and work shirts. The children work together there after a walk to the site. One child makes a suggestion, others give their input and they make adjustments. There is much verbalization and use of creativity and I've seen Arthur be part of this on occasion ----and , as himself.

So what are our conclusions from all of this? It's not a black and white issue; not an issue of good play vs. bad play or allowed play vs. disallowed play. We didn't make blanket rules but we used a child centered approach rather than a play or behavior centered approach. We did

other than get into the play and go with it. We decided that we really didn't need an inservice to instruct the staff on how to get superhero play under control but rather we needed an inservice on how better to look behind the behavior for clues on the needs of the individual child or the individual group. We considered the element of timing in looking at the superhero play - what is going on in the life and environment of the child or group at this time? For the group - if the environment was unstable, we worked to stabilize it - if the environment is stable, we worked to add exciting on-going sociodramatic play settings. There were times we chose to stop the play and redirect the children to other activities (pairing that with our assessment of the environment) - but it was an individualized decision and not a blanket rule. In the case of an individual child, we worked to reduce the fears, to provide experiences that build feelings of competency. "He-Man is one way to feel strong; going across the monkey bars is another way to feel strong". Then we helped these individual children gradually leave behind their props and their full time characters and enter into the greater world as the themselves. As Mr. Rogers^s says, "The world and most people in it can seem overwhelmingly large to children - to deal with the fears that come from being small in such a big world, children often pretend they have super powers and strength that will protect them against all that seems so powerful around them. It is quite natural for young children to identify with superheroes. Fantasizing and role-playing are an important part of growing up. They are the basis of future invention. But it is important for children to learn that, while it is fine to pretend they are super big, super strong, or super fast, it is their real selves that do the important things in life."

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